



# Living Healthy Working Well

## Autism

### What is Autism?

Autism is a spectrum disorder that typically develops in early childhood. Each individual with autism displays a different set of behaviors. Recent studies estimate that as many as 14 children out of 10,000 may have autism or a related condition. Boys are three times more likely to have autism than girls.

Autistic children may seem as if they are trapped in a world of their own, making it difficult for them to communicate. However, with appropriate treatment and training, some autistic children can develop certain aspects of independence in their lives. Parental support is important for autistic children to develop skills that use their strengths so they will feel good about themselves. More than 60 percent of adults with autism continue to need care throughout their lives. However, some programs are beginning to demonstrate that with appropriate support, many people with autism can learn to do meaningful work and participate in their community.

### What Are the Signs of Autism?

When an infant or toddler:

- Does not cuddle or respond to affection and touching
- Does not make eye contact
- Appears to be unable to communicate
- Displays persistent failure to develop two-way social relationships in any situation

- Does not show a preference for parents over other adults
- Does not develop friendships with other children
- Has poor language skills or nonexistent ones
- Shows unusual, extreme responses to objects – either avoidance or preoccupation
- Forms an unusual attachment to odd objects such as a paper or rubberband
- Says things repeatedly or does repetitive actions such as rocking or arm flapping
- Does a repetitive action such as repeating television commercials over and over

### How is Autism Diagnosed?

Parents are usually the first to notice unusual behaviors in their child. In many cases, their baby seemed “different” from birth, such as being unresponsive to people and toys, or focusing intently on one item for long periods of time. Signs of autism may also appear in children who had been developing normally. When an affectionate, bubbly toddler suddenly becomes silent, withdrawn, violent, or self-abusive, something is wrong.

To date, there are no medical tests that detect autism and the symptoms may vary from child to child. Parents and the child’s doctor need to rule out other disorders first, including hearing loss, speech problems, mental retardation, and neurological problems. Once these possibilities have been eliminated, a visit to a professional who specializes in autism is necessary.

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## What Causes Autism?

Researchers are unsure about what causes autism. It is generally accepted that autism is caused by abnormalities in brain structures or functions. Using a variety of new research tools to study human and animal brain growth, scientists are discovering more about normal development and how abnormalities occur. Several studies suggest that autistic disorder might be caused by a combination of biological factors, including exposure to a virus before birth, a problem with the immune system, or genetics.

## Can Medicine Help?

Medication cannot correct the brain structures or nerve connections that seem to underlie autism. Yet, scientists have found that drugs developed to treat other disorders with similar symptoms are sometimes effective in treating the same symptoms and behaviors that make it hard for people with autism to function at home, school, or work.

Medications used to treat anxiety and depression are now being explored as a way to relieve certain symptoms of autism. Some scientists believe that autism and these disorders may share a common problem that these medications apparently help.

## Autism Affects the Whole Family

The parents of an autistic child bear a heavy burden. They may experience feelings of helplessness with the child's inability to communicate, impulsiveness, emotional unresponsiveness, self-destructive behavior, and eating and toileting problems. Some parents find it difficult to accept the diagnosis and constantly look for other explanations. A child or adolescent psychiatrist can help parents with the emotional problems that may arise as a result of living with an autistic child and can also help them provide the best possible nurturing and learning environment for that child.

*Sources include the National Mental Health Association and the National Institute of Mental Health*

## Remember . . .

Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is available to you and your eligible dependents. EAP counselors are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to discuss your concerns and provide confidential assistance at no cost to you. As part of your EAP, you now have access to MagellanAssist. Visit today at <http://www.dpa.ca.gov/benefits/other/eap/Assist.shtm>

## Victims' Rights Week

Too many people in California have been victims of crime. To honor crime victims and those who provide services to them, the Office for Victims of Crime has designated April 6-12 as National Crime Victims' Rights Week. This year's theme is, "Victims' Rights: Fulfill the Promise." California programs are committed to fulfilling that promise by treating victims with compassion and dignity and ensuring they receive the help that they are entitled to by law.

A Crime Victims' March on the State Capitol will be held on April 8 to commemorate National Crime Victims' Rights Week in California. A program begins on the Capitol's West Steps at 11:45 a.m.

The California Victim Compensation and Government Claims Board offers financial help to crime victims. If you or someone you know has been hurt by crime, contact the California Victim Compensation Program at 1-800-777-9229 or check out their website at [www.boc.ca.gov](http://www.boc.ca.gov).

*"Living Healthy, Working Well" is a monthly newsletter distributed by MBC, an affiliate of Magellan Behavioral Health, to State of California EAP Coordinators.*